Torn between war and peace: Critiquing the use of war to mobilize peaceful climate action

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ABSTRACT

Notable studies have suggested the potentiality of the WWII wartime mobilization as a model for climate change adaptation and/or mitigation. The argument being that we need a similar rapid and total shift in our industrial social and economic environment to prevent or at least address the pending impacts of climate change. This argument and these studies have inspired us to think with them on what it means to use the WWII war analogy as a security claim in energy and climate change debates. Here, we would like to use this opportunity to draw attention to some of the implicit dangers of a call to war in such discussions. Among others we observe, first, the absence of any attention to the actual mobilization policies, in terms of garnishing public support. Second, based on the insights from Critical Security Studies, we question the historical incongruence of the case study especially by comparing the perceived enemy in both cases. Lastly, building on that same security literature, we point to some undesirable and perhaps unintended consequences of the use of war analogies in climate change debates.

Words are not only tools to think with, they are for all practical purposes the content of our thought. The vocabulary of any semantic environment defines the reality with which the environment is concerned.

Neil Postman, quoted in Gyi (1984), p. 138

1. Introduction

To arms! The age-old rallying cry is taken up once more these days, now to mobilize planners, investors and consumers for climate change mitigation. As but one example, Delina and Diesendorf (2013) have written an admirable reflection in this journal on the mobilization policies during World War Two (WWII) as a potential policy model for the extent of the action that is required to tackle climate change. It is a policy model and analogy that is increasingly invoked by a range of civil society actors spanning nongovernmental organizations, popular media and climate protestors, but can be traced linguistically to Carson's *Silent Spring* which 'coincided with the Cold War years in America and w[as] colored by them' (Glotfelty, 2000, p. 157. See Cohen (2010), p. 201 for an overview on popular media; but also Brown, 2008; Delucchi

and Jacobson, 2011; Wihbey, 2008). Indeed, one recent contribution to *Scientific American* intones that 'America's next president must declare war on climate change in the same way President Franklin Roosevelt fought the Axis powers during World War II' (Bolstad, 2016; referring to McKibben, 2016).

Instead of analyzing these calls themselves, authors and advocates generally build on them (clear exceptions are studies like Cohen, 2010; Oreskes, 2010) while offering historical accounts of national mobilization practises during WWII as a potential policy model for the action necessary to tackle climate change. For example, after discussing the scale and magnitude of the deployment, the finances behind the mobilization (the war bonds), the organization and reduction in labour regulations and the actual institutional governmental arrangements, Delina and Diesendorf argue that a war-like mobilization, while more complex in the case of climate change, might be what is needed to combat it. They ease their zeal for this approach slightly by noting that such a mobilization could be costly in terms of sacrificing democratic procedures and probably will be slowed down by the physical limits behind technological innovation and deployment (2013).

The article by Delina and Diesendorf falls within a longer list of contributions on the policy models behind WWII in debates on climate change. Besides the more popular contributions above by climate

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advocates, the most recent academic contribution to our knowledge has been Delina (2016), with earlier assessments coming from Bartels (2001) focussing primarily on the historic WWII mobilization parallel of Canada, Cohen (2010) looking at the use of the war analogy in the United Kingdom, Oreskes (2010) taking a more reflective perspective on the war analogy, and Malm (2015) who discusses the analogy from a Marxist perspective. To be clear, we do not reject the important historic insights that can be gained from a comparison of mobilization practices during WWII. In fact, one of us (Sovacool, 2010) even referred to World War I and the nationalization of energy resources, when U.S. President Woodrow Wilson created the United States Fuel Administration in 1917 to manually control the distribution of oil and coal, as a possible model of "hard" command-and-control models that planners may want to consider in forcing consumers off carbon.

However, what we observe is a shift from the rhetorical use of war (including metaphors like 'combat', etc.) to increase the urgency of climate change as a problem, to the use of WWII as an actual policy model to tackle it. While we are highly sympathetic to the first and, as mentioned above, not against the latter, we would like to reflect on the utilitarianism behind both of them and use this opportunity to draw out two theoretically inspired arguments. First, following the initial remarks by Bartels (2001), we would like to draw more attention to the actual *mobilization* that was going on in terms of support for the war, instead of the organization of the war effort. Second, we would like to draw upon the insights from social theory literatures and critical security studies, in particular those working on environmental securitization (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998; Chaturvedi and Doyle, 2015; De Wilde, 2008; Oels, 2013; Rothe, 2011; Scott, 2012; Trombetta, 2008), to ruminate theoretically on what it means to call upon the discourse and logic of war as a means to increase the urgency and legitimization of, in this case, actions against climate change. Primarily because we feel that the WWII policy model, in offering a threat analogy as well as a solution, offers an even stronger security claim than earlier war metaphors alone.

In offering these two points, we try to further the debate on what we see as the core problem when it comes to climate change action: the public acceptance of climate change as an imminent threat. We do this, not from the climate change debates but from a security perspective. Taking Delina and Diesendorf's paper as a starting point, we are aware that we shift the focus away from their intended policy model and towards the discourses and assumptions underpinning it (while also ignoring later work which dwells more critically on these aspects, see Delina et al. (2014). However, we feel that the authors finish at a similar position when they start by discussing the threat of climate change and 'the need to develop contingency plans' (2013, p. 371), for which they reflect back on the WWII mobilization, only to conclude that the biggest counter to such a war-like mobilization is the potential damage to democracy. To us that is simultaneously correct and paradoxical. The claim is correct because strong security rhetoric does indeed affect democracy. Yet, it is also paradoxical because the whole point of using such a strong security claim (including analyzing its potentiality) is to move the debate out of the regular democratic routines and public debates (see Buzan et al. (1998) on Securitization Theory). The instrumental use of security as a discursive source of power, in extreme, is precisely intended to justify notions of moving past normal democratic procedures into a wartime political economy that allows society to make sacrifices or compromises they would not ordinarily make. The relationship between security and regular (democratic) procedures is hence central, but also possess a conundrum for scholars because the acceptance of the perceived[1] threats by its intended

audiences is highly context dependent and as such hard to predict (Ciuta, 2009). As security is a future oriented affair, one that adds 6 billion wilful variables to the already extremely complex climate change models, it is not only the threat that is perceived, but also the public acceptance of the threat. This, we feel, is an essential issue and one that merits closer attention.

2. Mobilizing the troops

The war analogy extends the war metaphor, which is an often used mobilizing claim for an increasing range of issues: against diseases and epidemics, drugs, poverty, crime, obesity, corruption and old age, to list only a few examples (Chiang and Duann, 2007; Friedman, 2003; Heineman and Heimann, 2006; Larson, Nerlich and Wallis, 2005; Meierhenrich, 2006; Vincent, 2007). To be clear, besides the distinction that we see between the use of war as a rhetorical device and as an analogical policy model, this type of utilization for climate change mitigation also makes it stand out from other discussions where war is used in relation to the environment. This includes discussions on the potential wars over future scarce natural resources (Klare, 2001), discussions on how war and conflict will result from climate change (Hsiang and Burke, 2014), or discussions on the relationship between climate change and actual military warfare itself (Saritas and Burmaoglu, 2016).

Describing the "fight" against climate change in terms of a war is not an innocent claim, which is the point of its use. Deploying it in this manner has at least three political intentions.[2] First, as Bartels (2001) notes, it, tries to bring across the urgency of a particular situation. In this sense, as Cohen (2010), (p. 206) thoughtfully suggests, the horrors of WWII are used as a 'benchmark' for the urgency of climate change. Second, and more perniciously, attached to the claim are implicit calls for actions (explicit in the case of the war analogy) that would otherwise not be possible. It frees up resources, does away with standard procedures and legitimizes extreme actions. It is here that the war analogy with its policy model comes to the fore and shows its strength as it both draws on and strengthens the initial claim. Third, between the urgency and the legitimization of the rhetoric lies the hope of garnishing support, of enrolling consumers and other members of society into the discourse.

In this respect, a discussion of the social dynamics of this support is missing in the policy-focused work of Delina and Diesendorf, even though the creation of a shared understanding was a core aspect of the WWII mobilization policies themselves and there are clear links to the current climate change debates. Bartels similarly mentions the 'large scale publicity campaigns to "sell" the [...] emergency measures' in Canada but does not discuss them in-depth (2001, pp. 229–230). Instead he concludes that the support 'was not surprising in light of the consequences of defeat' and 'increased after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor' (2001, pp. 230–231, 230). In other words, as we will discuss below, the support builds on the imminence and coming about of the threat, without discussing the work done to actually sell the threat to legitimize the particular chosen extraordinary actions.

However, even a brief glance at the literature that discusses the mobilization processes during WWII details the importance of the movie and music industry, but also the role played by the advertisement industry and the Treasury department. These efforts culminated in the hard work that was done to actually "sell" the war to the American public (Jones, 2006; Kimble, 2006; McLaughlin, 2006; Stole, 2012). Relevant for the climate change campaign is the fact that even the WWII "threat" itself was not always sufficient for parties to join the campaign. Stole (2012), for instance, argues that the advertisement

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[1] Starting from Critical Security Studies, in particular Securitization Theory, implies that climate change is taken to be a *perceived* threat as this branch of literature argues that all security claims are future oriented and as such always imagined: the moment a security threat comes true it no longer is a security concern but a problem to be solved. The latter working from a different social logic – more routine like politics – while the security concern itself shifts to a new imaginary: not the question if an event happens, but how long it continues, how to find the resources to survive, etc.

[2] Turner (2005) also finds three purposes behind the use of war metaphors: justification, persuasion and as a heuristic tool that opens up to a reasoning by analogy to uncover novel insights and policy recommendations. Delina and Diesendorf's article falls in the latter category, while ours focusses more on the first two aspects.